

## OUR DIGITAL LIFE

The Nexus of Culture and Technology



BY  
DAN TYNAN

## DEMAND PERFORMANCES

Eventually, you'll be able to watch whatever you want, wherever you want. But not today.

My family and I don't watch television anymore. However, we consume TV shows the way Homer Simpson eats doughnuts. These statements may seem contradictory, but they're not.

A few years ago we gave up on the 100-plus channel TV world. We even dropped HBO. When we want to watch a show, we rent the DVDs. We watch them whenever we want, for as long as we want — and we don't have to fast-forward through commercials.

But lately even our eight-disc Netflix plan has failed to satisfy our video appetites. So we connected a laptop to the projector in our movie room and tuned in to Netflix's Watch Instantly, which streams films and TV shows directly to our computer over the Internet.

That's when we encountered the big problem with video on demand: too much demand, not enough video. Only about 7 percent of Netflix's 90,000 titles are available to watch instantly. The service is terrific if you like depressing European documentaries, obscure British TV programmes, and movies that never made it to the rental rack, but it's not so good if you want to watch, say, *Spider-Man 3*.

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Dan Tynan writes this column every month for *US Airways Magazine*. His latest book is *Computer Privacy Annoyances*.

We ran into similar snafus with Amazon Unbox, which lets us download movies directly to our TiVo. Ditto for other online movie services like CinemaNow, MovieLink, and Vongo. Each serves up a handful of new releases every month, but the rest of their libraries consist of the stuff that shows up on cable at 3 a.m. And really, how many Steven Seagal movies can any human watch?

It's not that digital content isn't available. It's just not easily available all in one place. Thanks to a complex series of agreements, a single movie may be available only to theaters for a specified time, then to pay-per-view networks, then premium networks like HBO and Showtime, then video stores and movie download services, and so on. You may be able to download *Oceans 13* from Amazon Unbox one month, but not the next.

"The technology and business rules today are confusing and frustrating for consumers," notes David Wertheimer, executive director of USC's Entertainment Technology Center. "If content providers don't find frictionless methods to give consumers what they want, then the users will expend the energy required to get it their own way."

Wertheimer's job is to bridge the gap between studios, who like to maintain near-total control over their product, and the digital world, where anything that isn't dead simple to use typically winds up dead in the water.

Right now, nothing in the on-demand entertainment world is simple. But Wertheimer believes that over the next five years studios will figure out how to bring their business models in line with technology, which will make life easier for consumers who want to watch their stuff anytime, anywhere.

The landscape is already shifting. As I write this, Steve Jobs is on stage 3,000 miles away, announcing a scheme to allow iTunes customers to rent movies online and carry them around on their iPods. In typical Jobsian fashion, he's convinced the biggest studios to release control over some of their content. iTunes will feature about a thousand movies at launch — still a tiny fraction of the world's film library,

but a step in the right direction.

Me? I want everything. I want to be able to choose any movie or show ever recorded — Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, an episode of *Gomer Pyle*, or a YouTube video some kid churned out in his parents' basement — and watch it on any device, whenever I feel like it. I think we'll get there eventually. For now, however, our video-on-demand needs are just a bit too demanding for Hollywood. To quote my old pal Gomer, "For shame, for shame, for shame."

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